What Parents Should Know...

About Bullying

What is Bullying?
Bullying is an intentional behavior that hurts, harms, or humiliates a student, either physically or emotionally, and can happen while at school, in the community, or online. The bully often has more social or physical “power,” while those targeted have difficulty stopping the behavior. The behavior is typically repeated, though it can be a one-time incident.

Students often describe bullying as when “someone makes you feel less about who you are as a person.” Students who bully perceive their target as vulnerable in some way and often find satisfaction in harming them.

(Definitions vary greatly. You can find your state’s law and definition at StopBullying.gov)

Recognizing Types of Bullying

Bullying behavior can be broken down into five categories:

Verbal
Physical
Emotional/Social
Sexual
Cyber

Verbal bullying is the most common type of bullying and the easiest to inflict on other children. It is quick and direct. It includes teasing, name calling, making threats against the target, intimidating, making demeaning jokes about someone’s differences, spreading rumors, gossiping, and slandering. Children understand quickly how words can be used to hurt each other. Boys tend to name-call and threat, while girls use slander and gossip to gain social power.

Physical bullying can be the easiest to recognize. It is the most visible behavior. Physical bullying includes hitting, kicking, pushing, taking or damaging property, and forced or unwelcomed contact.

With this type of bullying there can be an intimidation technique, which can include instances of “pretending to physically harm the target (e.g., flinching: flicking fingers or extending hands close the target’s eyes or face, causing a withdrawal reaction). Physical bullying is more common by boys against boys, but girls can also be subjected to physical bullying (e.g., biting, hitting, and kicking).
Emotional/Social bullying is described as the most sophisticated of all types of bullying because it is generally very calculated and is often done in groups. It can be the most difficult behavior for children to define as bullying because they may feel as if they did something to deserve it.

Emotional aggression is harmful to a student’s ability to learn, grow, and succeed. It includes behaviors that impact relationships with peers through damaging, threatening to damage, or manipulating one’s relationships with his/her peers. For example:
- Purposefully ignoring someone when angry (the silent treatment)
- Spreading rumors about a disliked classmate
- Telling others not to play with a certain classmate as a means of retaliation

Emotional abuse peaks in middle school when children are experimenting with social boundaries and learning about the power of inclusion and exclusion. The behavior becomes bullying when the intent is to cause another person pain and to assert social control.

Sexual bullying may be the most difficult type of bullying for a child and parents to discuss. Children need to know acceptable boundaries and appropriate behavior in social relationships.

Examples of sexual bullying include:
- Sexually charged comments
- Inappropriate or lewd glances
- Inappropriate physical contact
- Exhibitionism
- Sexual assault

Students need to be provided with the appropriate social rules and norms for dating and flirting so they can act with respect toward their peers and recognize when someone is not respecting them sexually.

Cyberbullying has been defined by the national Crime Prevention Council as, “When the Internet, cell phones, or other devices are used to send, or post text or images intended to hurt or embarrass another person.” Cyberbullying encompasses e-mails, or text messages to someone who has requested no further contract with the sender, but may also include threats, sexual harassment, hate speech, and ridiculing someone publicly in online forums.

Bullying vs. Conflict

In normal conflict, children self-monitor their behavior. They read cues to know if lines are crossed, and then change their behavior in response. Conflicts are arguments in which opposing parties have different views, while bullying is a behavior with a malicious intent to hurt another individual. Bullies can sometimes even get some satisfaction in their cruel acts against other children. In normal conflict, kids are aware of their actions. When lines or boundaries are crossed kids will want to stop and often become apologetic. This does not happen in bullying situations. Bullying is not about resolving conflict. Bullying is about control. Bullies find satisfaction in harming their targets.

Strategies used to resolve conflict are not applicable for resolving issues that are centered around bullying. The appropriate message to the child who is bullied and to the bully should be, “Bullying is wrong, and no one deserves to be bullied. We are going to do everything we can to stop it.” This approach establishes a no tolerance policy. It lets the child who is being bullied and the bully know that all actions will be taken to stop the bullying.

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The Impact of Bullying

Research demonstrates the short- and long-term damage caused by bullying. The range of students’ reactions to bullying (from school avoidance and lack of concentration to depression and thoughts of suicide) reflect its overwhelming negative impact on children.

1. **Education** – Bullying can negatively impact a child’s access to education and lead to:
   - School avoidance
   - Decrease in grades
   - Inability to concentrate
   - Loss of interest in academic achievement
   - Increase in dropout rates

2. **Health** – Bullying can also lead to physical and mental health problems, including:
   - Headaches, stomachaches, and sleeping problems
   - Low self-esteem
   - Increased fear or anxiety
   - Depression
   - Increased aggression
   - Self-isolation
   - Self-harm, such as cutting, and thoughts of suicide

3. **Safety** – The U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights (2010) lists the following as possible effects of student harassment and bullying:
   - Lowered academic achievement and aspirations
   - Increased anxiety
   - Loss of self-esteem and confidence
   - Depression
   - Post-traumatic stress
   - General deterioration in physical health
   - Self-harm and suicidal ideation
   - Feeling of alienation at school
   - Fear of other students
   - Absenteeism from school

What a Parent of a child with a disability can do about Bullying

As a parent it is important to recognize the signs that a child is a bully, as well as the signs of one who is being bullied. Children with visible and invisible disabilities are significantly more likely than their peers to be the victims of bullying behavior. The type of bullying differs according to the child’s disability. Children with visible conditions, like cerebral palsy and spina bifida, are more likely to be called names or aggressively excluded from social activities. Children with learning disabilities report higher rates of teasing and physically abusive victimization. Obesity has also been linked to higher rates of bullying.
Children with disabilities are not exclusively victims of bullying. Research suggests that children with ADHD are more likely to demonstrate bullying behavior than their typical peers. Impulsivity and a lower tolerance for frustration are characteristics of this disorder that are also associated with bullying. Peer relationships are often extremely difficult and complex for children with ADHD. Whether the child is the bully, or the victim, school bullying impedes learning and stunts the development of a healthy self-esteem.

Children with disabilities who are eligible for special education under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) will have an IEP (Individualized Education Program). The IEP team can work together to develop goals, benchmarks, or short-term objectives, and identify supplementary aids and services or program modifications or supports to help prevent and intervene against bullying. You may want to include the child in the decision-making, as this can improve the likelihood of the child meeting his or her IEP goals.

For example, the IEP could include goals and objectives that address the following:

- Improve social skills such as sharing, taking turns, or thinking before acting
- Develop ability to carry on a 2-way conversation
- Identify social norms for the child who does not catch on to them by him or herself
- Participate in friendship groups to practice social skills with peers under direction of school staff
- Increase self-advocacy skills so child can say “no” or “stop that”
- Improve speech intelligibility so child can interact with peers
- Identify and practice direct and indirect ways to react to, handle, and avoid bullying behavior

Examples of supplementary aids and services, program modifications or supports:

- Hallway or playground monitoring by school staff
- Allowing child to leave class early to avoid hallway incidents
- Use social stories to help child understand difficult situations when they occur
- In-service for school staff to understand child’s disability and vulnerability
- In-service for classroom peers to help them understand child’s disability and/or child’s use of assistive technology, paraprofessional, or interpreter (i.e., things that are “different”)
- Educate peers about school district policies on bullying behavior
- Set up a no-questions-asked procedure for child to remove him or herself from a situation where bullying behavior occurs

*Being alert and observant as a parent is critical to recognize bullying since victims are often reluctant to report it. If your child wants to avoid riding the bus or stay home from school, has increased anxiety, withdraws, has missing or damaged personal belonging, unexplained headaches, or stomachaches, and unusual changes in routine or temperament may be an indication that your child is being bullied.

If your child tells you about a situation and you are not sure if it is bullying, use this checklist:

- Does your child feel hurt, either emotionally or physically, by the other child’s behavior?
- Has your child been the target of the negative behavior more than once?
- Does your child want the behavior to stop?
- Is your child unable to make the behavior stop on his/her own?

If the response to one or more of these questions is “yes,” the more likely it is that the behavior would be considered bullying.

The following are examples of guidelines you may utilize when concerned about bullying and your child:

Learn to recognize the signs of bullying. Children who are bullied and those that bully are equally in need of support and guidance from caring adults.

Instill confidence and pride in your child’s abilities and disabilities. Children with special needs who have developed a sense of pride in their differences are less likely to be victimized by bullies.

Communicate with all parties involved. If you believe your child may be the victim or the instigator of bullying, contact teachers, principals, and other parents of children who are involved. Put your concerns in writing.

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Review the anti-bullying policy of your child's school. If there is not one in place, advocate for the adoption of guidelines to address this serious impediment to learning.

Request an Individualized Education Program (IEP) team meeting if you believe bullying of your child is based on his or her disability and is interfering with learning. Disability harassment is illegal. This form of severe intentional harm is considered “disability harassment” under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and under title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.

Seek Support. Bullying is a serious and harmful aspect of childhood. Avoid labeling and model calm, rational, and assertive behavior for your children to observe.

Talk with your child
Provide a supportive place where your child can work out his or her feelings. Encourage your child to talk and let them know they are not alone, and you are there to help.

Make sure your child knows:
• Bullying happens to lots of kids. It is NOT their fault. They are not to blame.
• Bullying is never okay. Kids have the right to be safe and feel safe.
• No one deserves to be bullied. They deserve to be treated with respect.
• It is the adults’ responsibility to make the bullying stop.

Listen to learn as much as possible about the situation, such as how long the behavior has been happening, who has been involved, and what steps have been taken and the result.

You can help your child become an effective self-advocate. Self-advocacy involves speaking up for oneself, telling people what you need, and taking action. Your child’s self-advocacy skills will allow him/her a greater sense of control over a bullying situation. Exploring self-advocacy skills with your child can offer him/her a framework of how to address the situation in a proactive manner.

Self Advocacy is knowing how to:
• Speak up for yourself
• Describe your strengths
• Take responsibility for yourself
• Learn about your rights
• Obtain help or know who to ask if you have a question

*Reactions Parents Should Avoid:
• Telling your child to stand up to the bully
• Telling your child to ignore the bully
• Taking matters into your own hands

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Know the Laws!

United States Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) is committed to working with States to ensure that school districts provide all children with positive, safe, and nurturing school environments in which they can learn, develop, and participate. The United States Department of Education sent a letter to school principals, superintendents, and college university presidents on July 25, 2000. The letter provides an overview of legal and educational principles involved in harassment based on disability. Educational institutions have a responsibility to ensure equal educational opportunities for all students, including students with disabilities. The responsibility is based on Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (Title II), which are enforced by the Office of Civil Rights.

OSERS states, “Bullying of a student with a disability that results in the student not receiving meaningful educational benefit constitutes a denial of a free appropriate public education (FAPE) under the IDEA that must be remedied. However, even when situations do not rise to a level that constitutes a denial of FAPE, bullying can undermine a student’s ability to achieve his or her full academic potential.” OSERS shared specific strategies that school districts and schools can implement to effectively prevent and respond to bullying and provides resources for obtaining additional information.

Most states have laws that address bullying, but the content of each law varies considerably. Some of the laws are robust and address a variety of elements such as reporting, education required for school personnel, collecting data, how to respond to situations, requiring a designated person to investigate bullying reports and more. Other state laws are brief with minimal definitions and requirements.

Additional information on each state’s bullying and harassment laws can be found at www.stopbullying.gov/laws/index.html

Action Steps for Parents

It is important to contact school staff each time your child informs you that he/she has been bullied. Documentation will help you and your child ensure that important details are not missed and will help the school act accordingly. Written records should include facts only (specific words or phrases, behaviors, actions) an no opinions.

Documentation might include:

- Written account of bullying incident with date/time of event, place, and witnesses
- Child’s account of the event
- Records of bullying incidents via social media, online and/or text
- All communication with professionals (teachers, administrators, physician, etc.), dates of the communication and responses of the professionals
- Action taken

PACER’s National Bullying Prevention Center, (PACER.org/Bullying) has created 3 sample letters that as a parent you may use as a guide for writing a letter to your child’s school. The letters contain standard language and “fill in the blank” spaces so the letter can be customized for your child’s situation.

PACER’s Center sample letter(s) can serve two purposes:

- First, the letter will alert school administration of the bullying and your desire for interventions against the bullying
- Second, the letter can serve as your written record when referring to events. The record (letter) should be factual and absent of opinions or emotional statements

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The three sample letters are, the “Student with IEP, Notifying School About Bullying” (PACER.org/bullying/pdf/Student-w-IEP-Notifying-School-About-Bullying.doc)
“Student with a 504, Notifying School About Bullying” (PACER.org/bullying/pdf/Student-w-504-Plan-Notifying-School-About-Bullying.doc)
“Notifying School About Bullying of any child who is being bullied,” (PACER.org/bullying/pdf/Notifying-School-About-Bullying.doc). The bullying law of the individual state applies to students with disabilities. When bullying is based on the child’s disability, federal laws can also apply under Section 504, Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) and Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act of 2008 (ADAAA).

Steps to take prior to contacting the school

*Talk to your child. Before contacting school personnel, write down the details of the bullying situations reported by your child. Note the dates and the names of the kids involved.

*Your child may resist your involvement. If so, explain to your child that most bullying situations require adult intervention to resolve the problem.

*Contact school personnel for assistance in ending the bullying. First share the problem with your child’s teacher(s) and work together to decide how to approach the problem. If the teacher cannot get the bullying under control, go to the principal, and make a formal request in writing.

*Do not contact the bully or the bully’s family directly.

*Keep an ongoing log of the dates of any further bullying incidents and the action you take to help your child deal with the bullying. Inform the school of ongoing bullying incidents.

What to Expect from your School?

If the bullying occurs at school, then the main responsibility for achieving this goal lies with the school officials. It is important, however, that the parents of the victim collaborate with the school to implement an agreed-upon plan for solving the problem.

The school must provide immediate and appropriate action to investigate, communicate with targeted students regarding steps to end harassment, eliminate any hostile environment, and prevent harassment from recurring. If the school is not taking necessary action, parents may consider filing a formal grievance with the Office of Civil Rights.

Whether your child is a bully, victim, or bystander, you should expect the following from his/her school:

- School administrators, teachers, and staff should take bullying problems seriously. The school should investigate the situation and let you know what steps they are taking to help stop the bullying.
- Written school policies and rules against bullying, harassment, and intimidation should be in place and be enforced.
- Teachers and administrators should speak to the bully and his parents. They should also tell him what the consequences will be if he does not stop bullying others. If the bullying continues, the school should enforce the pre-determined consequences immediately.

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• Teachers and administrators should increase adult supervision in the areas of the school campus where bullying incidents are most likely to occur.
• School personnel should be well-informed about the children who are being victimized by bullies so they can monitor and provide support to the victims as needed. They should communicate with the victims’ parents to tell them how the situation is being handled at school.

Bullying prevention programs in school are often a very effective way to stop bullying.

Resources

Great Schools
https://www.greatschools.org/gk/category/learning-disabilities/

PACER
www.pacer.org/bullying

Kara Ayers for Disabled Parenting Project
http://disabledparenting.com/author/kara/

United States Department of Education
https://www.ed.gov/

Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS)
https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers/index.html

Stop Bullying
www.stopbullying.gov/laws/index.html